Words from the Author

Barton, Chris. Illus. Tony Persiani. *The Day-Glo Brothers*. Watertown, MA: Charlesbridge, 2009.

Chris Barton

One day during the revisions of my book *The Day-Glo Brothers*, I was reviewing a round of sketches while waiting in the dentist's chair. The hygienist came in and asked what I was looking at. I gave her a quick spiel about how I had written but not illustrated a children's book about Bob and Joe Switzer's trial-and-error invention of daylight-fluorescent colors.

"They sound like nerds," she said.

My next stop that morning was at the auto mechanic's. When he handed me an invoice printed on what would commonly be described as neon-green paper, I pulled out the sketches and said, "I've written a book about the guys who *invented* this color."

His reaction? "Wow!"

The story of how I turned the Switzers' obscure, chemistry-intensive, entrepreneurial tale into an award-winning picture book has everything to do with those two reactions. It was all about my belief that, unlike the hygienist, the children I was writing for had the capacity to respond to the invention of Day-Glo with "Wow!" rather than with "They sound like nerds."

My manuscript and I had to meet them halfway, though, and that took a while. Here are some numbers that I love to bring up when discussing *The Day-Glo Brothers* during my visits to schools and libraries:

> 8: The number of years that passed between my first letter to the Switzer family and the publication of the resulting book
>
> 23: The number of rejections this project received before Charlesbridge Publishing said "Yes!"
>
> 6,200: The number of words in the picture book manuscript I initially circulated to publishers

That third number is largely responsible for the first two. Clearly, an unpublished author writing about a bizarro topic that could only be done justice with expensive ink—let alone one trying to peddle a picture book manuscript many, many times longer than the norm—was more trouble than he was worth. And he had a lot to learn about making a child-friendly book.

That last part, at least, was perfectly true, but I was more than willing to try. I am tempted to say that the first step was paring away 4,000 words or so (resulting in a still-pretty-long picture book). Truly, though, the first step was taken by Bob and Joe Switzer themselves in inventing something—brand-new, super-bright colors—so exceptionally in tune with the sensibilities of curious young readers. All I had to do was zero in on the parts of their story that were the most fun, the most relevant, and the most meaningful for my audience.

Along with those thousands of extra words, the fun was there from the beginning. The very first draft of *The Day-Glo Brothers* began with the Egyptian pyramids and Statue of Liberty that were eventually depicted by illustrator Tony Persiani in all their imaginary Day-Glo glory. And even someone like me, one more used to thinking in words than in pictures, could grasp the visual possibilities in the Switzer brothers' early, ultraviolet involvement with dancing skeletons, fluorescent scenes of Santa Claus, and huckstering spiritualists. Cutting a long section describing the brothers' involvement with a Cincinnati laundry company was an easy choice.

But I do not believe that readers would care nearly as much about Switzers' invention if they did not care about the Switzers themselves. That is why quite a lot of the surviving text has nothing directly to do with the colors that Bob and Joe invented. Moving much of the scientific explanation of light, color, ultraviolet energy, and fluorescence into the book's back matter (and into some nifty online animation) meant more room to make the brothers into characters with whom my readers could relate.

"Who in this room has a brother or a sister?" I ask during my school visits. Lots of hands go up, including my own. Then, the follow-up: "Who in this room is exactly like your brother or sister and always gets along with them?" Just about every hand comes down, including my own.

The fundamental differences in Bob and Joe's personalities, and their successful collaboration despite (or because of) those differences, may be the element of the story with which readers can most identify. I imagine that—especially considering the economic climate of 2009, when *The Day-Glo Brothers* was published—readers can also relate to the hard times, both financial and medical, experienced by the Switzers. The same goes, I believe, for the Switzers' geographic relocations from Montana to Berkeley to Cleveland—any child who has even changed neighborhoods knows something of what that's like—and for the brothers' (occasionally unauthorized) use of their family's posessions in their

experiments. (The destruction of Bob's wife's wedding dress in the pursuit of advances in fluorescence rarely goes uncommented-upon by the classes I visit.)

As I emphasize to students, though, *The Day-Glo Brothers* is a story of many things—and science is one of those things. Yes, the bulk of the science lies outside the narrative, a beyond-wise editorial decision that solved the problem of the brothers' story getting stopped cold—twice—by scientific explanation. But regardless of where in the text that information ended up, my editor and I believed that we owed it to our audience to do that material justice and present it in such a way that would attract readers rather than push them away.

To do that, I had to understand the science at a level a few layers deeper than what we presented in the book or online. In order to engage young readers with relatively simple descriptions of regular and daylight fluorescence, I had to make myself understand what goes on at the atomic level. And though readers will find nothing in the book about the rising and falling of electrons, I did include an offhand reference to the chemical uranine and the dye anthracene as nods toward the sort of material I was leaving out, a glimmer of specificity that says, "This stuff became commonplace for Bob and Joe, and you can handle it, too."

No discussion of the child-friendliness of *The Day-Glo Brothers* would be complete without a gushing acknowledgment of the wonders achieved by Tony Persiani's illustrations and Charlesbridge's design efforts. Inspired by Brian Selznick's playful, engaging, wonderfully appropriate illustrations for *The Dinosaurs of Waterhouse Hawkins*—brand-new at the time I began working on my book—I had a vague notion that a book about the invention of Day-Glo could have oodles of visual appeal to young readers. Tony and Charlesbridge went and made this notion concrete.

I do not know whether children pick up on the retro feel of Tony's illustrations and the way they transport adult readers back several decades, but I have no doubt that the cartoonishness of his art does much of the heavy lifting in making the science in our book more palatable to readers tottering on the boundary between reading *The Day-Glo Brothers* and choosing something else. And while Charlesbridge's use of isolated spots of various shades of daylight-fluorescent ink was largely a practical decision—the desire to use three Day-Glo colors having collided with the limitations of four-color printing—the *Wizard of Oz*-like appearance, then explosion, of color startles me even now upon each reading of the book.

Charlesbridge and Tony have seen to it that I am not alone when I think "Wow!"

About the Author

Chris Barton is the author of the American Library Association Sibert Honor-winning *The Day-Glo Brothers* (Charlesbridge, 2009; illustrated by Tony Persiani), the Junior Library

Guild selection *Shark VS. Train* (Little, Brown, 2010; illustrated by Tom Lichtenheld), and the forthcoming young-adult title *Can I See Your I.D.? True Stories of False Identities*. For more information about Chris, his books, and his presentations to young readers and professional groups, visit him at http://www.chrisbarton.info.